When the British took possession of the Island of Tahiti in 1767, they incorrectly assumed that a high-born woman named Purea was the queen of all Tahiti, and crowned her ‘Queen Oberea.’ This led to a long standing misinterpretation of Tahiti as some sort of domicile, feminine utopia, where women “championed for their exoticism,” and who fulfilled “male fantasies of a tangible paradise,” took centre stage in Europe’s understanding of the small island kingdom. Indeed, the French explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville described the island as a “modern Cythera,” the island on which, according to Greek myth, Aphrodite alighted after being born from the sea. Purea became the “emblem of Tahiti” due to these early European accounts, and “[b]y the 1830s, actual and armchair travellers had crowned Tahiti as ‘the queen of the Pacific’ for its feminised luxuriance.” This feminized view of Tahiti differed from conceptions of dangerous or morally loose women such as the Amazons of Greek myth – a comparison which characterizes the savage, uncivilized portrayal of many other peoples in the South Pacific, particularly where missionary enterprises had failed such as Tonga and the Marquesas. Rather, the “imagined ‘Tahitis’” that such early accounts produced in Britain and Europe painted Tahiti as a sort of anti-Amazonian female paradise, where the “moral restraint, sobriety, maternal characteristics and acceptance of Christianity” were the dominant perceived characteristics of Tahitian culture. In the nineteenth century, Queen Pomare IV continued the legacy of a feminized Tahiti, taking up the mantle from her eighteenth century counterpart Queen Oberea, albeit with the added layer of saintly martyrdom. Being the queen while the French invasion of Tahiti was taking place cast Pomare in the role of a pious, suffering mother, but this image was carefully constructed in order to win the sympathies of the British, and catalyse the contribution of support and aid. This role was not, however, simply formulated by others and placed upon her. Pomare was an “active agent in fashioning her image with the assistance of her European allies…

2 Ibid.
4 O'Brien, “‘Think of Me,’” 109.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
by promoting herself as a paragon of Victorian womanhood.”

This deliberate self-fashioning, and Pomare’s involvement in the creation of her persona showcases the queen’s political dexterity and ingenuity as a ruler. Over the course of her life and term as queen, Pomare demonstrated an ability to adapt and evolve around the changing tide of cultural influences and political powers in Tahiti, skilfully navigating the male dominated societal influences of both Tahiti and the encroaching European powers.

Queen Pomare IV was born Aimata, daughter of Pomare II, the Tahitian chief who had converted to Christianity after he realized “conversion would bring… benefits through enhanced relations with Britain,” and it would also “aid the boom in trade” which had begun thanks to Tahiti’s growing importance as a strategic port in the Pacific. After the death of first her father, and then her brother Pomare III, Aimata took the title Pomare IV and became queen of Tahiti in 1827.

In the beginning of her reign, Pomare showed a great deal of indifference towards the religious and moral reforms brought in during her father’s rule. She had a number of critics, one of the most vocal being William Pascoe Crook, a missionary of the London Missionary Society who was present in Tahiti during Queen Pomare’s reign. Crook remarked that he “thought her [Pomare] prone to the lowest behavior of Tahitian women: drinking and promiscuity.” He went on to accuse Pomare of prostituting young women to sailors, and he reported that the queen, as well as her mother and aunt, had “been afflicted with the venereal.” Another critic, the Belgian ‘merchant adventurer’ Jacques Antoine Moerenhout, portrayed Queen Pomare as “disobeying the authority of powerful male chiefs when it came to restrictions on sex, alcohol and the outlawing of the Mamaia [a religious cult which mixed elements of Christianity and traditional Polynesian beliefs].”

From the narrow perspective of a straight-laced Protestant missionary, or a conservative Belgian merchant, Pomare’s conduct would have certainly appeared immoral, but Pomare’s behaviour in the early part of her reign is indicative of an attempt to gain respect and power within the gendered Tahitian worldview. Anthropologist Niel Gunson notes that gender roles were just as clearly defined in Polynesian culture as they were in Western culture. Men were expected to be “aggressive, independent… and sexual adventurers,” while women were generally expected to be “dependent, reticent, and practitioners of domestic crafts.” However,

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7 Ibid.
8 Ibid., 100.
9 Ibid., 111.
10 Ibid.
11 Ibid., 112.
Gunson goes on to remark that one of the “only persons to lastingly transcend these roles were… chiefly women,” or “female headmen.”\textsuperscript{13} Since the role of ‘headman’ was considered a male role, any women who held office “were thought to be acting as men.”\textsuperscript{14} Thus, Pomare’s loose sexual behaviour, prostitution of women and disregard for Protestant moral restrictions are evidence of a young queen’s attempts to fit into the male role of ‘headman’.

Europeans such as Crook and Moerenhout were not the only ones who disapproved of Pomare’s behaviour. Tahiti’s lesser male chiefs, who had embraced Christianity and the masculine power that came with it, were affronted by Pomare’s all-too-masculine authority. Crook bemoaned the fact that “Tahiti was governed by these ‘loose women’ – Pomare, her mother Teremoemoe and aunt Ari’ipaea Vahine – who challenged the male judges and chiefs who tried to uphold… morality laws, even to the point of creating ‘war.’”\textsuperscript{15} In fact, after she “attempted to revive demonstrations of submission by chiefs to the sovereign” in 1832, Pomare was nearly deposed by angry male chiefs.\textsuperscript{16} Pomare managed to keep her leadership thanks to British backing, but she learned that she would have to adapt her ruling style in order to maintain power in a post-conversion Tahiti. Like her father before her, Queen Pomare turned to the British and the missionaries of the London Missionary Society for support when she found her power wavering. The constructed image of Queen Pomare touted by the \textit{Juvenile Missionary Magazine} – a periodical targeted at children – and missionaries such as George Pritchard,\textsuperscript{17} came to fruition when, in 1835, “Pomare sought baptism and became a mother for the first time.”\textsuperscript{18} These two acts formed the basis of Pomare’s saintly mother persona, which would become pivotal to her representation during the French invasion.

An article in the November 1846 issue of the \textit{Juvenile Missionary Magazine} relates the plight of Pomare’s children in highly didactic language. It relates a scene onboard the \textit{Basilisk}, a ship-of-war to which Pomare fled, and resided on with her children for about six months after the French annexed Tahiti.\textsuperscript{19} The image of Pomare as a tortured, saintly mother

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} O’Brien, “‘Think of Me,’” 111.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 112.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 109. Pritchard was an LMS missionary who enjoyed a great deal of power in Tahiti, acting as an advisor to Queen Pomare. Pritchard’s “writings coupled with those of several other LMS missionaries and British naval captains,” painted a very positive portrait of the queen that “fed into a marketing machine for Pomare in Britain”.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid. 112.
is cemented in this article, which describes how “the close confinement made her [Pomare] ill, and it was with sorrow that the poor captive queen saw her little ones droop around her.”  

The family adrift on the water, displaced, drooping and ill, conjures a scene of suffering and wrong. The children are so close, and yet so far, from both Tahiti and their mother. Pomare’s plight functions synecdochically, embodying the plight of Tahiti, and indeed the larger struggle of the missionaries in the South Pacific. Pomare’s children are meant to be equated with the Tahitian populace in general, and Pomare functions as a mother figure not unlike the Virgin Mary. Moreover, Pomare becomes a representation of Tahiti itself, a role that would have been easily accepted by a British audience already conditioned to regard Tahiti as the ‘queen of the Pacific’. This representation of Tahiti through its leader fits with anthropologist Marshall Sahlins’ theory of ‘heroic polities’ in the South Pacific, in which “the social whole was understood to be embodied in the person of the chief, his or her actions assuming a culturally magnified significance as history.”

While Sahlins’ theory was developed to describe the process of history-making and story-telling he observed in the cultures of the South Pacific Islands, it can also be applied to Queen Pomare’s constructed persona, which draws on Pomare’s own culture as well as the ideals of the missionaries who helped her to fashion her image. Sahlins uses the term “totalisation” to denote the heroic reinterpretation of events in history, which are focused more around chiefs or heroic characters. Thus, the Tahitian conflict between Pomare and the faceless threat of the French can be viewed as a heroic reinterpretation, or ‘totalisation’ of the imperial struggle between the British and the French, and Protestantism and Catholicism.

The feminization of Tahiti and the infantilization of its people is further demonstrated in these lines from the poem “Pomare in Tears,” which appeared in the Juvenile Missionary Magazine’s December 1844 issue: “Weep, ye children of Tahiti! / Nursed in peace from war estranged.” The poem reduces the Tahitian Conflict to a woman, weeping over the loss of her children, an image that carries significant weight, as the practice of infanticide is constantly evoked in missionary literature about South Sea Islanders. Later, in the September 1845 issue, a picture of Pomare during the French invasion, and the article describing it, transform the queen into a personification of the island itself: “In the other [picture] is

Society 3, no. 11 (1846): 250.

Ibid.


Ibid., 322.

Tahiti invaded, wronged, insulted – her soil trampled down by foreign troops – her people alarmed – her liberty scorned, and her religious privileges almost annihilated – her queen in tears.”

The image of Pomare in tears is interchangeable with the very land, and the language evokes a rape of the island by French forces. This further entangles the entities of the queen, the spiritual metaphor she represents, as well as the people and the place which she embodies. In the image to which the article refers, Pomare’s presentation suggests the Virgin Mary, facing away from the invading French troops and staring up to heaven with a resolute, yet almost peaceful expression, a child balanced on her lap. Her family members look beyond her towards the invading troops, but Pomare has transcended the physicality of the situation; her persona lives in the realm of the divine.

Despite the magazine’s overwhelmingly militant portrayal of Pomare as a martyr and mother figure, there are instances when her resourcefulness and political experience shine through the propaganda. For instance, in the November issue of 1845, an article on the queen lauds her for refusing to consider the French’s terms, stating: “I don’t wish the protection of France; I desire only the protection of Jehovah and his truth.” The Magazine goes so far as to say that her words deserve “to be printed in letters of gold, copied into every album in the country, and engraven on the hearts of all our young friends, ay, and of every prince and sovereign in the world.” However, less than two years later, after the French succeed in capturing Tahiti, the magazine reports that Pomare “thought it useless to resist any longer, and therefore went from Raiatea to Tahiti to submit to the protectorate of France.”

The Magazine goes from proclaiming Pomare’s defiant words an example even to princes and sovereigns, to reporting, and justifying her actions, which completely reverse those same words. Before, she was being portrayed as a woman who would never budge, and needed only God’s protection. Yet suddenly, once the French have taken Tahiti, to return and submit to their demands is deemed the only viable action. In truth, these are the actions of a prudent ruler, not a puppet of the missionaries. Pomare has Tahiti’s best interests at heart, and acts the part of Christian martyr only as long as it is beneficial to

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26 Ibid.
28 O’Brien, “‘Think of Me,’” 108. This could be a subtle jab at Queen Victoria, who, during the Tahitian conflict, stated that she sympathized with French King Louis Phillipe who wished “Tahiti au fond de la mer [at the bottom of the sea]” due to the friction it had caused between the two countries.
her. When it is no longer any help, she reverts back to her identity as strong-willed ruler, and seeks to win the favour of the French because ultimately, by submitting to them she is merely pledging allegiance to the flag of a different European oppressor.

There is certainly much more to Queen Pomare’s character than the simple, saintly portraits of George Pritchard and the Juvenile Missionary Magazine, or the lecherous, immoral descriptions of Crook and Moerenhout. Both camps seek to cast her as an absolute; either a paragon of faith and womanhood, or the personification of debauchery and loose morals, and both approaches fail to acknowledge Pomare’s struggle to define herself as a female ruler within a male hierarchy, and as a native authority within a European hierarchy. Ultimately, Pomare’s decisions and allegiances hinged on the interests of herself and her people, and she made use of the allies and resources available to her – just as her father did – be they Protestant missionaries or French soldiers. Her fifty year reign stands as a testament to the political experience and ingenuity of a truly formidable female ‘headman.’
Bibliography


